

GREEKS AND ARABS
IN THE
CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN AREA

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This article is the second and larger part of a paper read at a Symposium on *The Relations between Byzantium and the Arabs*, held at Dumbarton Oaks in May 1963. The text here published was preceded by a reassessment of the three great scholarly works of Amari, Gay, and Vasiliev on Byzantine-Arab relations in Italy and Sicily, and by a short survey of more recent studies in this field. The omission of the first part in the printed version accounts for the lack of any reference to these chief authorities in the pages that follow.

The clash between Byzantium and the Arabs in the Central Mediterranean appears to us first of all as a problem of naval supremacy, of actual domination over the sea. The Arabs had first approached sea power with diffidence and considered it a purely subservient function of their conquests by land; but it speedily gained importance under the Omayyads, whose Mediterranean vocation has been stressed by recent historians, like Gaudefroy-Demombynes and Monès,¹ and whose conscious purpose of supplanting Byzantium has been illustrated by Gibb.² This consciousness of belonging to the Mediterranean, and plans for expansion in it, were abandoned with the fall of the Omayyads (or, according to Gibb, under their last great caliph, Hishām). The emergence of the Abbasids marked the final Orientalization of the Caliphate; it had been the heir and the rival of Byzantium; now it became the continuator of Asiatic traditions—in the first place those of the Sasānids. The Abbasid state, even in its heyday, was entirely continental; it had no war fleet of any importance; it liquidated Maghrib, or at least suffered it to become detached from the Empire. In brief, it turned its back on the Mediterranean. But the heritage of Mu ‘āwiyah, Walīd, and Maslamah passed into other hands, precisely through the disintegration of the great imperial structure after the Omayyad period. Admittedly with more limited means and aims, smaller but more organic formations took up the expansion by sea of the Islamic forces, which appeared increasingly indispensable to the continuation of conquest; the Aghlabites, the conquerors of Sicily, were the first to understand the island’s geopolitical value and the advantage of including it in the *dār al-islām*; later the domination by sea over the Central Mediterranean was divided between the Fatimids (who had supplanted the Aghlabites on the North-African *‘idwah*) and their Western rivals, the Omayyads of Spain. Besides the regular naval forces of these various states, private and semiprivate initiatives deserve notice. Then, as in other periods (e.g., the Ottoman-Barbaresque, or the period of English naval expansion in the sixteenth century), these forces cooperated with the regular fleets, replaced them, or mixed with them. According to present-day concepts of international relations, such activities amounted to piracy, but they correspond perfectly to *jihād*, an Islamic religious duty. The conquest of Crete, in the East, and a good portion of the corsair warfare along the Provençal and Italian coasts, in the West, are among the most conspicuous instances of such “private initiative” which contributed to Arab domination in the Mediterranean.

¹ M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes et Platonov, *Le monde musulman et byzantin jusqu’aux Croisades* (Paris, 1931), pp. 270–2; H. Monès, “al-Muslimūn fī hawd al-bahr al-abyad al-mutawassit ilā l-hurūb as-salibiyyah,” *Bulletin of the Egyptian Society for Historical Studies*, 4 (1954), p. 80ff.

² H. A. R. Gibb, “Arab-Byzantine Relations under the Umayyad Caliphate,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 12 (1958), pp. 219–33 (now also in the same author’s *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* [London, 1962], pp. 47–61).

Here one may wonder whether in the ninth and tenth centuries Arab domination over the one-time *mare nostrum* of Rome was as complete and exclusive as it appeared to Pirenne. His famous theory on the split of Mediterranean unity is based on Arab intrusion, with the consequent economic decay of the Carolingians and the emergence of a new structure of the whole Western economy and culture in the high Middle Ages. If an Orientalist may be allowed a word in this historical discussion, so far carried on almost exclusively by historians of the Western Middle Ages, the very basis of Pirenne's theory is open to doubt. It is precisely when one considers the area here under discussion—the Sicilian Canal, Sicily, and the Italian peninsula—and the events which took place along the fringes of the Mediterranean during those centuries, that the entire concept of either a complete unification or a splitting up of the Mediterranean becomes questionable. All these waters and territories were certainly the battlefield of Christian (mainly Byzantine) and Arab-Islamic forces, but neither one of the rivals reached that complete supremacy by sea which would have meant final victory over his enemy. As Bury has already pointed out,³ at a time when its naval forces were at an ebb Byzantium was attacked in the Central Mediterranean by the increasingly active Islamic navy. Byzantium had abandoned the farsighted program of Constans II and had withdrawn the strongest part of its fleet to the Aegean: this caused the loss of Sicily, which then, open to invasion, could be replenished with fresh Arab troops from Africa, while the Byzantine fleet was unable to intervene with any success. However, Byzantium's initial inferiority had already begun to decrease under Michael III and disappeared entirely under the Macedonian dynasty, when the theme of Cephalonia became the base of Byzantine naval operations in defense of Greece and Southern Italy. Then, at the end of the ninth century and throughout the tenth, around Sicily and the Italian coasts, maritime warfare developed between Greeks and Arabs—with varying fortunes, neither side being able to overcome the other. Obviously this means that in resources, technique, and military capacity the two fleets were more or less equal; while Byzantium never succeeded in regaining full control over the Central Mediterranean, the Arabs were never able to sail undisturbed wherever they wished, as Pirenne would have us believe. Other facts also contradict his theory, or, at any rate, greatly reduce its validity. The very assumption, founded on modern experience, that it is impossible to sail or to trade in areas where there is naval warfare, or where piracy prevails, can be disputed. Even in regard to modern times can we say that the Western Mediterranean was "closed" in the years of Barbaresque piracy? As for earlier centuries, we have evidence, collected by Gibb, of commercial and even diplomatic relations between Byzantium and the Arabs in the very period of the *sawā'if* in Anatolia and the large scale expeditions against Byzantium. Concerning this same Central Mediterranean, the supposed diaphragm between East and West, we have Ibn Khurdādbih's (middle of the ninth century) famous account of the

³ J. B. Bury, "The Naval Policy of the Roman Empire in Relation to the Western Provinces from the 7th to the 9th Century," *Centenario Amari* (Palermo, 1910), II, pp. 21-34.

voyages of the "Radanite merchants," who went by sea from the coasts of Southern France to Perama on the Delta; how else could they have travelled than through the Straits of Messina or the Sicilian Canal? Only when they reached Egypt did they take the land route to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.⁴ We are willing to admit that in the ninth century such a route was fraught with risks and misadventures still unknown in the Merovingian period, but if the enterprising Jewish merchants of Provence faced them, they could not have been absolutely insurmountable. Granting even the existence of a dual blockade, in addition to the menace posed by the opposing Arab and Byzantine fleets, "business as usual" may have been the motto, as it certainly was the practice, of those seafaring merchants at the height of the Carolingian epoch. In those very same years, and with a completely different purpose, the holy Sicilian father Elias travelled back and forth by sea, from Sicily to Africa, from Africa to Palestine, and thence to Calabria, Rome, and Greece, as his biography records; he did sometimes encounter Saracens and pirates, but never met any insuperable obstacle to his pious wanderings.

It is, therefore, our modest opinion (shared by other Orientalists, such as Hoenerbach,⁵ who have approached the subject) that the Central Mediterranean was not entirely closed as a result of the Arab-Byzantine conflict over Italy, and that this conflict does not reveal a permanent Arab dominion over the sea. Such a domination would have enabled the Arabs, after the conquest of Sicily, to penetrate the mainland much more deeply and enduringly. At first, Byzantium, overwhelmed on land and on the seas by the bold Aghlabite offensive, retreated from Sicily step by step. Putting up an ill-organized but tenacious resistance for decades, it considered Sicily lost only after the disastrous fall of Syracuse. But the Arabs, in their turn, even when in the ninth century their initiative by land and by sea was at its height, could never prevent Byzantium from victualling, through the strait of Otranto, its themes in Longobardy and Calabria; indeed, in the last quarter of the ninth century, Byzantium was able entirely to re-establish direct domination over these themes, and to do away with the Muslim "enclaves." Notwithstanding their temporary settlements in Bari and Taranto and their lightning-like raids on the coast of Puglia, the Arabs never dominated the Ionian or the Adriatic seas; only such a conquest could really have severed Italy's contact with and aid from Byzantium, and it would have had incalculable consequences in the political, social, and religious spheres. On the other hand, the Muslim naval offensive in the Thyrrenian sea—undoubtedly more violent and more systematic—was checked by the unaided forces of the Italian states, which received little or no direct help from Byzantium. Thus the temporary naval superiority of the Arabs in the first half of the ninth century enabled Islam to conquer Sicily; while later the restored equilibrium between the rival forces contending for sea power enabled Byzantium to defend Southern Italy, and, in the long run, to do so

⁴ Ibn Khurdābih, *Kitāb al-masālik wa l-mamālik*, Bibl. Geogr. Arab., VI, pp. 114–6.

⁵ W. Hoenerbach, "La navegación omeya en el Mediterraneo y sus consecuencias politico-culturales," *Miscelanea de estudios arabes y hebraicos*, II (Granada, 1953), pp. 77–98.

successfully. For the Arabs to cross the Straits of Messina no special naval effort was needed, and one cannot help wondering why stable Arab domination did not extend beyond Sicily or why, having set foot on the Italian mainland times without number, the Arabs did not make their conquest permanent. Here a parallel with what happened, on a larger scale, in Spain and in France is unavoidable. While Spain was almost completely Arabicized, France was merely subjected to raids which left small Arab settlements on its coasts. There was no intention or possibility of permanent Arab territorial occupation involving political and social organization; of transition, in brief, from sporadic raids to ordered civil life. The supposed ruins of a mosque at Narbonne, like the short-lived mosque of Reggio on the Calabrian coast, might almost be considered a symbol of this limitation. The two buildings epitomize the unsuccessful effort by Islam to take roots beyond the Pyrenees and beyond the Straits respectively. In the case of Italy, I think we should take into account, beside the Byzantine defense and counter-offensive, the weakness of manpower and of military organization in Muslim Sicily; the island did indeed achieve a sort of semi-independence from Ifrīqiya, but always continued to lean on the latter and was incapable of developing an energetic political action of its own, over and above the short-lived action of *ghazw*. Nor did Sicily ever receive from Africa those great waves of political-religious revivals which Spain received from the Almoravids and Almohads, and which might have infused new energy into Sicily and encouraged it to further organized conquests. The Fatimid creed, which, as is well known, did not exert a profound influence even in Egypt itself, left no traces at all in Arab Sicily. In the second half of the ninth century, a large number of Saracen raids occurred throughout Southern and Central Italy, but we do not get the impression of their ever having been part of a plan or organized conquest, as Mūsa's, Tāriq's, and Asad's campaigns had been in Spain and Sicily. Their only object seems to have been destruction and looting which was also the object of the armed groups faced by Charles Martel on the *Balāt ash-Shuhadā'* near Poitiers. On the other hand, while in France it was the Carolingian resistance, and later that of the secular and ecclesiastical rulers in Aquitania and Provence, that destroyed the brief Saracen settlements, in Italy the credit for resistance belongs to Byzantium's tenacity for reconquest. The Popes, the Empire, the Longobard rulers, and the maritime republics of Italy surely contributed their share, but not without ambiguous compromises, pacts, even understandings and alliances, with the infidels; this is well known in the case of Naples and of the Longobards of Salerno and Benevento. Always, and to the very end, the "number one" enemy of the Arabs in Italy was Byzantium, which admittedly acted in defense of its own domination. It performed its office as the bulwark of Southern Christianity against the invader. The long and persistent defense succeeded at last in unifying Southern Italy and reconquering Sicily—but the fruits of the Byzantine effort were gathered by the Normans.

The encounters between Greeks and Arabs in the Central Mediterranean area were even more exclusively military than those in the Eastern Mediterranean.

For the Greeks the issue was to preserve, as far as possible, the heritage of Rome and Justinian, while the Arabs intended to spread the message of Islam and a political power now representing not the huge unity of the Caliphate, but more restricted Arab-Mediterranean entities. This paper is concerned essentially with political relations—philosophical, religious, and artistic, and literary contacts between Byzantium and Islam are illustrated by other members of this symposium. Nevertheless, while keeping strictly to the Siculo-Italian field, we cannot omit a passing reference to these other aspects of the contact between Greek and Arabic languages, faiths, and cultures over and beyond the unceasing and monotonous military struggle. Indeed, in the intellectual field, both in Sicily and on the Italian mainland, the two worlds, even when they were not at war, seem to have co-existed in an atmosphere of disdainful mutual contempt which, for a long time, permitted more fruitful contacts only on the artistic level. Each civilization kept to its own ways, drawing inspiration from ancestral heritages whose main centers were elsewhere: in Constantinople, on the one hand, and in Baghdād, Qairawān, Cordova, and later Cairo, on the other. The classical themes of anti-Islamic religious debate find an echo in the apologetic speech of Elias to the Saracens, as reported in the Life of that Sicilian saint.⁶ The no less classical themes of Arabic war poetry, the *hamāsah* sanctified by *jihād*, ring out in the recollections and boasts of Ibn Hamdīs, the Sicilian Abū Firās, who exalts the military successes of Islam on Calabrian soil, the landing of the Muslim troops at Reggio and their exploits against the patricians whom they cut to pieces or put to flight.⁷ Not infrequently the sources reveal that large sections of the population in Sicily, and to a lesser extent even in Southern Italy, were bilingual; for instance, the Arab victors overrunning Syracuse spoke *in Greek* to the Bishop and his comrades who had sought refuge at the foot of the altar. But literary instances of this phenomenon, such as the double text of the so-called “Cambridge Chronicle,” are quite exceptional. In this period of conflicts we find, scattered and contrasting, those elements of the two civilizations which will reach a peaceful symbiosis only in Norman society and culture.

It is needless to stress the syncretistic function and activities of the Normans. In the society and culture of their period it is not always easy to discern the Byzantine and the Arab components; sometimes they appear overlapping and entwined, the most typical instance being the *Ufficio del Riscontro* (*Dīwān at-tahqīq*) for taxation and land survey, with its *defetari*, evidently derived direct from the Arabic, but in its turn perhaps going back, through Egypt and Africa, to Byzantine precedents, as Chalandon supposed. In the main, we venture to say, Byzantium, with its theocratic ideas, its complex bureaucracy, and its gorgeous and elaborate ceremonial, remained for the Normans the great model on the political, religious, and administrative planes. Like

⁶ *Vita di Sant'Elia il Giovane* (Istituto Siciliano di studi bizantini e neoellenici, Testi, 7 [Palermo, 1962]), chaps. 23–24, and the commentary by G. Rossi Taibbi (*ibid.*, p. 143 ff.).

⁷ F. Gabrieli, *Ibn Hamdīs* (Mazara, 1948); *id.*, “Sicilia e Spagna nella vita e nella poesia di Ibn Hamdīs,” in the volume *Dal mondo dell'Islam* (Milan-Naples, 1954), pp. 109–26.

the Omayyads of Syria in the seventh and eighth centuries, so the Hauteville in Sicily and Italy in the eleventh and twelfth considered themselves at the same time the enemies, the competitors, and the potential heirs of the Byzantine Empire, and did not hesitate to take from the Greek element, both in Italy and in the Byzantine-Arab Levant, the men best suited to their policies and their administration (Christodoulos, George of Antioch, Maion, Henry Aristippus). Their entire conception of royal power, as well as part of their juridical and administrative structure, was Byzantine, and Greek was the first official language of the Norman State; they used it, as Canard has pointed out,⁸ even in their diplomatic relations with Muslim powers, so that we may speak of a genuine process of Byzantinization of the Kingdom, reaching its height with Roger II and later beginning to give way to an increasing Latinization under William I. But this primary Greek influence, recognizable in the civil and military organization (particularly in the navy), in law, and in the royal titles, must not, of course, induce us to overlook the other component, the Arab, whose principal sphere seems to have been rather that of customs, culture, and art. As regards the Orientalized aspect of the Norman court, Ibn Jubayr's pages are so famous that we need not recall them here. For culture and science, it is sufficient to mention the works of Edrisi and the Arabic poets of Roger's court, and the use of Arabic, along with Greek, on buildings and coins. Such usages are partly due to practical needs—Arabic was the only language understood by one part of the population—but they were also a tribute to a superior culture. The Hauteville came very close to an appreciation not so much of the intrinsic merits of Arabic (except in the purely literary and artistic fields) as of its importance in interpreting classical science and philosophy. Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, and Ptolemy, the most famous and most beloved representatives of these disciplines in the Middle Ages, were approached by scientists and translators of the Norman period via a double route: either directly through the Greek, or through Arabic translations. My lack of specialized knowledge permits me only to hint at the Greek-Arab contacts on Sicilian soil in the field of art. The Palatine Chapel, with its Byzantine mosaics and its ceiling painted and inscribed by Muslim artists, stands as the most magnificent symbol of a peaceful fellowship. Thus, in their love of science and in their highest artistic achievements, Greeks and Arabs, the two former enemies in the Mediterranean, appear at last reconciled within the brilliant Norman synthesis.⁹

Their previous struggle, lasting over three centuries, on the seas and in the territories of the Central Mediterranean, may be differently judged, depending on whether one adopts an Arabic, a Greek, or, finally, a Mediterranean (we dare not say, European) point of view. For the mediaeval Islamic world in its entirety, the Sicilian adventure and the conflict with Byzantium on that front had only a secondary and marginal value. The great Oriental historiography

⁸ "Une lettre du calife fatimite al-Hāfiz à Roger II," *Atti del congresso internazionale di studi ruggeriani* (Palermo, 1955), I, p. 144.

⁹ On the culture of the Norman period, see, besides the earlier fundamental works of Amari, Chalandon, and Haskins, A. De Stefano, *La cultura in Sicilia nel periodo normanno*, 2nd ed. (Bologna, 1954).

barely noticed it; Maghribi historiography, of course, recorded its events, but always as an appendix to the main line of its narrative and its interests, which were constantly centered on North Africa. Sicilian Islam did not receive any sympathy from so acute and curious a traveller as Ibn Hawqal, who nevertheless furnishes very valuable information about it. The fact that modern Arabism has taken a much keener interest in this Mediterranean adventure of the Arabs is due to a new nationalistic consciousness and vision of the Arab past instilled chiefly by European examples.¹⁰ The voice of Byzantium was silent forever after May 29, 1453; its echo is to be found only indirectly in the historiography and political ideals of modern Greece, and in Western historians like Gay, Vasiliev, and Grégoire, who have redeemed the Byzantine Empire from the contempt of illuminists and romantics. In this more equitable vision of the role of Byzantium in the Middle Ages, the prolonged defense of Italy against Muslim pressure also has its share of merit, to be viewed in the framework of the general task Byzantium performed in protecting the classical heritage and the Christian faith.

Finally, if we view through Italian eyes, the Arabicization of Sicily and the long Arab-Byzantine duel which followed it, we shall see in the Arab phase of Sicilian history one of the most fascinating and puzzling components among the multiple threads woven into the island's stratified civilization. For Italians, and for Europeans in general, it represents the South's great contribution, ethnographical, historical, and cultural, to the melting pot wherein the Italian people and their nation were formed; an element which was instrumental, together with the Germanic one in the North, in refertilizing the great Greek-Italic-Latin trunk that had been the protagonist of our peninsula's most ancient history. And the Byzantine resistance in Southern Italy appears to us no less providential, for it prevented the total denaturation of our Latin-Greek foundations, the "Semitization" of that part of Italy comparable to the one which for many centuries was imposed on the Iberian peninsula and still partly influences its destinies. From a distant point of view the equilibrium of the Greek and Arab forces on the Italian front seems to have allowed both seeds to take root on our soil, in harmonious proportions, producing exceptional fruits on the political and cultural levels. Though they were perhaps denied time to reach full ripening, they represent one of the most brilliant periods of Mediterranean and Italian civilization. Viewed from this angle, what might appear as a long struggle between two irreconcilable ethnical and cultural elements, consuming one another without fruit, reveals its posthumous fecundity.

¹⁰ Cf. the recent book in Arabic by Ihsān 'Abbās, *al-'Arab fī Siqilliyyah* (Cairo, 1959).